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THE INCOGNITO

By Israel Puchtik (Zilanka)

Immediately at the beginning of our stay in the forest, we carried out a number of reprisals against the Ukrainian Nationalists ("Zelinovtzim"), the Ukrainian police and other collaborators. But our dream was to carry out a large operation against the Germans themselves. The opportunity was not late in coming. Our company received a mine that had been sent from Moscow to the partisan command. A Soviet partisan also arrived who instructed us in the laying and detonation of mines.

Six of us Jewish partisans went out with the Soviet partisan to carry out this mission on the railroad tracks between Manyevitz-Cherevache. We placed a mine on the rails and were ready to set it off by a long string we held as soon as a train was to pass. Suddenly we saw German scouts heading directly towards where we were hiding in a grove, and the young, brave partisan, Volodye Zwieble, was commanded to quickly remove the mine. But it exploded in Volodye's hands, and he screamed for help. The Russian commander blocked our way to rescue him, and at gunpoint commanded us to run for the forest. We were devastated by our having had to abandon him to his cruel fate, and Volodye's cries rang in our ears for a very long time afterward.

The next day we were informed by a Ukrainian liaison what had happened to Volodye. The explosion had blown off a leg and a hand and had injured his entire body, but he had remained lucid. The Germans tortured him mercilessly, but he did not betray his comrades nor did he reveal the partisans' base.

After this tragic incident, the anti-Semitic commander at headquarters, Kartuchin, ordered that no more mines were to be given to the Jewish company because they were cowards. This prejudice caused great bitterness in our hearts, especially since we knew that the failure of the mission and the loss of our dear comrade was strictly the Russian instructor's fault.

During the years 1939-1941, a captain-engineer in the artillery by the name of Mahmud was stationed at the headquarters in the town of Povursk. He was tall, dark-skinned and handsome. When the Soviets retreated, he decided to gather the unexploded bombs so that the Germans would not be able to make use of them, and, with the help of his soldiers, he buried them in pits in the nearby forest. He himself was taken prisoner, escaped, and went about alone in the forest until a partisan unit was organized.

Once, while they were near the town Koval, the Germans attacked with a steady and heavy rain of fire. Captain Mahmud covered for his men until they all succeeded in escaping to safety. This was but one of Mahmud's brave exploits, but he was never given credit by the anti-Semitic Kartuchin who suspected that he was a Jew in spite of the fact that this was never proven during the entire period he spent in the forest.

Mahmud was transferred to the Jewish company under "Kruk." Here, too, he did not reveal his identity and continued to claim that he was of Kavkhaz birth. He never stopped proving the Jewish partisans' skills to his gentile commanders.

He organized the removal of the buried bombs and their transfer to "Kruk's" unit, and under his personal supervision a "factory" was set up for the extraction of the explosive powder to be used in mines. This dangerous work, under the most primitive conditions and without equipment was carried out by Jewish youngsters in the family camp. Unfortunately, 2 boys, Syomka and Peyske, not having followed orders, were blown to bits.

Mahmud gradually improved the methods in the "factory" and in the explosion of mines. It is to his credit that "cowards" such as Malinka, Verba, Kuperberg and many others from "Kruk's" unit that tens of trains, bridges, water installations, etc. were successfully blown up. As a result, many gentile partisans came to appreciate the capabilities of the Jewish unit and to change their attitude towards them.

With the Soviets' victories and their advance to our area, many partisans from this unit joined the ranks of the Red Army. Among the many were Ze'ev Bronstein, Abraham Merin, Zecharia Wiener, Shmuel Lupa, Gorodetzer and his 2 daughters. Almost all of them fell in battles in the liberation of Königsberg (Kaliningrad), Warsaw and Berlin. (The 2 Gorodetzer sisters live in Israel.) Mahmud also joined the Red Army.

My wife and I, along with other partisans were staying in the town Refalovka. One day I saw Mahmud in the railroad station wearing the uniform of a major in the Red Army. He had been a captain in the forest. I ran up to him and shouted, "Mahmud, Mahmud, what a hero you are - you're already a major!" The officer looked at me blankly and asked, "Who are you? I don't know you." I apologized and told him of his great resemblance to Mahmud of Kavkhaz.

The officer begged me to tell him more and more about Mahmud, and I told him all that I knew. "He is my twin brother!" he cried with tears in his eyes. "His name is not Mahmud but Melamed. Our family had lived in Kavkhaz before the war. We were sure he was dead, and here he is alive - under the name of Mahmud!"

We parted with a handshake and a "shalom aleichem." The Jewish officer Melamed from Kavkhaz had been forced to hide his Jewish identity not only because of the Germans but also, and mainly, because of his comrades-in-arms, the Russian partisans.

Translated from Yiddish to Hebrew
By Yehuda Merin